LOST AND FOUND
Luke 15:1-10
March 11, 1979

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Some of life's most vivid and intense experiences have to do with being lost. There is certainly nothing quite as frustrating as becoming lost while driving an automobile. The frustrations become embarassment and humiliation when one's spouse and children are observing. I've come to admire and respect and imitate those drivers who can be totally lost and yet disguise the fact; without any idea where they are, yet still driving aggressively, with apparent confident intent. To be lost is such a disgrace that many of us choose to become more lost rather than admit it by asking for directions.

As I thought about it I concluded that to be lost is to confront one's vulverability, fallibility, and I suppose, mortality. Sometimes when you're really lost it can be frightening. It happened to me this summer: fortunately most of my family were asleep. We were driving south from the Highland of Scotland. The main highway, a freeway, according to the map, went straight through Glasgow. Well, it didn't. It stopped in the middle of the city. I had no map of Glasgow. And after several roundabouts, those demonic British inventions - traffic circles instead of square intersections, designed to separate a driver entirely from any sense of direction - we were really lost. And I found it just a bit frightening. Rationally, we know - in that situation - that it is simply a matter of getting a map, collecting one's thoughts and proceeding: that there is no ultimate threat to life and limb: that there is no record of people perishing on the roundabouts of Glasgow, the one-way streets of Columbus, or the tortuous cul-de-sacs of Upper Arlington. Yet there is something about the experience that is more powerful than it should be.

I am told that buried in the subconscious for most of us is a sense of lostness; either a memory or a fear. I know that I have one, a very vivid memory: I was in the first grade. We had moved to a new neighborhood and I had been taken to school with careful instructions about walking home. I got lost. I recall walking in strange territory for what seemed like a very long time. I recall being afraid. But what I recall most about that experience is sheer joy and relief, when I heard a whistle and looked down a hilly street and saw my father - looking for me.

Jesus, master story teller that He was, drew on the power of the human experience of lostness, in a remarkable sequence of four parables - two of which constitute our text this morning.

The proper people were complaining about the company Jesus insisted on keeping. It was terribly important to them, apparently. They - scribes and Pharisees - were quite proper, politically, socially, religiously. They observed all the rules and regulations: they were the pillars of their society - literally. They were the intellectual elite: the financial and commercial leaders. The Pharisees were all right. Without them, or someone like them, no kind of ordered society is possible. But they didn't like the company Jesus kept. He continued to show up with tax collectors and sinners. Tax collectors were, frankly, traitors. They were Jews, working for the Romans, who had paid a fee to get their position. They were detested. Sinners were all those common folk who didn't have time for, nor much interest in the niceties of formal religion. They didn't observe the rites and rituals: they never went to the Temple, didn't keep a kosher kitchen, and their praying - such as it was - was not very sophisticated and could be pretty earthy. They were poor people. These are the ones Jesus spent a lot of time with thereby alienating the Pharisees who thought it was not only tasteless but also illegal to be with such people, particularly to break bread with them.

So they complained a little, in voices just loud enough that He could hear. I envision an actual scenario: Jesus in the shabby home of one of these poor people, at table.eating: a small cluster of Pharisees walking by, peering in, seeing Him at table and saying - "Would you look at that! Look who He's associating with. He presumes to talk to us about goodness and morality - you'd think He'd begin by being a little more careful about who His friends are." Jesus heard it - and to His table companions told a series of stories, again in a voice loud enough that the Pharisees outside the door could hear as well.

The first of those stories is about a shepherd who lost one of his sheep, went out to find it, brought it home and called his friends in to celebrate. The second is about a woman who lost a coin, and turned her house upside down to find it. She, too, calls her friends in to celebrate. At the end of both stories Jesus explains - in case anyone failed to get the point: God is equally happy when one lost sinner repents. God, by inference, is looking for those who are lost.

Now, to continue with my scenario, the ones around the table - the ones who were made to feel bad by the arrogance of the Pharisees, begin to feel better. They're lost and they know it. They're glad to know someone is looking for them. The Pharisees outside are listening more carefully now. "He has a point, you know. We don't really need any help with religion and morality. Sheep in the fold don't need the shepherd. The one who strays away does. Those people He associates with are certainly lost." And so they begin to understand and even to accept what Jesus is doing. "He's befriending these people because He wants to help them and they certainly need all the help they can get."

Then Jesus told a third story. And they liked this one even better. This one was about a young son who took his share of his father's estate, squandered it having a glorious time in the next city, was reduced to poverty, decided to come home and was welcomed by his father. Now he has the Pharisees nodding in agreement. "All these sinners - they're exactly like that ungrateful, irresponsible boy. As a matter of fact, the way they live, they might as well be in a foreign land."

At this point, I am suggesting, Jesus has disarmed His critics, has them listening intently and agreeing because He's talking about other people. And then He told the clincher: a fourth story about a young man who was lost in another way. He was the older brother of this young vagrant. He had never wasted anything: he was loyal, obedient, hard-working, faithful. He could not bring himself to join the party, celebrating his brother's return. He remained - separated from his father's love - out in the field, lost. I don't see how the Pharisees could have failed to understand that he was talking about them.

This remarkable sequence of stories contains important material - suggestive material - on the question of God and the human condition. Let's look more carefully.

The image of the shepherd is an important one in the Bible. It is an image of great strength, although you and I may miss that part of it entirely simply because we don't know many shepherds. David the King was a shepherd. Sheep are used metaphorically throughout the Bible - "All we like sheep" - "He will gather the lambs to his bosom" - "like a sheep led to the slaughter." At the birth of Jesus the angels make their momentous announcement to the shepherds. And of course one Psalm, perhaps the most strikingly beautiful words - which have ever been written: "The Lord is my shepherd: I shall not want."

When "sheep" and "Shepherd" appear in the Bible, all of that symbolism is usually lurking nearby. Certainly in the parable of the Lost Sheep Jesus meant to draw on the corporate memory of His people.

The impact of the story is somewhat diminished for us by the simple fact that while Jesus was being terribly contemporary in His illustrations, most of us have never even seen a shepherd. Our mental image has been shaped by innocuous Sunday School art in which shepherds look like nice middle class college boys on their way to a toga party.

Years ago D.M.Baillie wrote a commentary on a painting of the Good Shepherd: "The trouble with most of the 'Good Shepherds' is that they are good for nothing - a pretty man holding a lamb in his bosom. To one who has seen shepherds in Palestine there is something particularly repugnant in such a representation. No real shepherd ever wore the elegant draperies that adorn these artist models...When you come upon a real shepherd in the shepherd's country something is apt to grip your heart and your throat. Shepherding there is a man's job! There you see the rough jacket made of a fleece turned wool side in: the bare legs scratched by thorns; rough shoes of rawhide: the great club of oak with its knot on the end, - heavy enough to fell a bear; the high stepping stride and the muscles like steel - the fearless eye that can face danger alone; and you often see a lamb in the strong arms." (Christ and the Fine Arts, p.203-205, from The Gospel in Art).

We met a few shepherds this summer in Scotland. We helped with a "clippin'": at the end of our stay one of them gave me his crook as a memento of our experience. They were not very romantic figures. They were simple, strong, rough, indomitable men. There is no such thing as a day off. A shepherd chases the sheep down the mountain in the morning, and up again at night. He counts them, stands them on their feet when wet wool causes them to topple, helps at "lambin" and "clippin" times and recovers them when they're lost. The old Biblical image, still evident in these marvelous people is strength, courage and attention to each individual sheep.

God, Jesus said, is like that. He is most like the shepherd who goes after one lost sheep and stays with it until he has found it. And that, frankly, is one of the pivotal ideas in the religious thought of the world - God as pursuer: human beings, the objects of His pursuit.

Practically the entire religious experience of the human race moves in the opposite direction. The highest and noblest human endeavor always has been the quest for God, the endless search to find the creator. That's what religion is, mostly: the method people devise to help them in their search for God. Some of those methods emphasize introspection and meditation: some focus on disciplined study and prayer - others on rigid self-denial: some emphasize emotional catharsis: almost every one of them is based on some form of exclusivism - the position that our religion is the only way to find God and all others are blind alleys. In fact, there is a sense in which "exclusivism" and "religion" are synonymous. "I Found It" the bill boards and bumper stickers announced a while ago, as if to say "We're all looking for the same thing, but this is the only way to succeed in the search." I loved the bumper sticker which answered. It bore a star of David, the lettering looked semitic: it said "I never lost it." Or the Presbyterian version, in jest only, but more to the point, "It Found Me".

That is what Jesus was saying about God, here and elsewhere. That is what the Bible is saying on every page of the Old and New Testaments. The one doing the searching is God. He is the pursuer. He isn't lost, we are. Right religion isn't a new way to find Him, rather it's a way to say "thank you" for being found.

The oldest image of God there is is one of royal remoteness. Like an oriental potentate, Nebuchadnezzar, or Cyrus, or Solomon, God sits on a throne, surrounded by a court,a guard; mighty, high, holy, other. An individual, if he or she is religious enough, obeys enough rules, says enough prayers, sings enough hymns or gives enough money, might - just might - approach the periphery of that royal court and be granted the most precious of all human experiences- a vision of God himself, or at least the assurance that there is someone sitting on the throne. That is the oldest image of God and our relationship to Him around. It is also the most current.

Jesus completely destroyed - destroys - that picture. God isn't a potentate, He's a pursuer. He doesn't wait for people to find Him: He's out in the pasture or wilderness tracking them down. He isn't up here behind the communion table waiting for you to approach Him. If Jesus can be trusted God is wherever you go to get away from Him: He is in that particular wilderness in life where you feel lost - looking for you. And on occasion, when you think you found Him, what it really means is that He found you for a moment.

George Arthur Buttrick made the very helpful observation that "Jesus seldom called people sinners: He called them lost." (The Parables, p.180). We have allowed the best and most helpful analysis of the human condition to fall into disuse. We have listened on the one hand to the optimists who say that there is nothing wrong with the human condition that a little education, better housing, a balanced diet and enough social workers can't remedy. History and experience teach us the superficiality and inadequacy of that position. It simply doesn't take evil seriously.On the other hand, traditional Roman Catholicism and evangelical Protestantism have combined to analyze the human condition in terms of sin; original, total, "there is no health in us" - sin.

You don't arrive at either of those positions by observing and listening to Jesus. He was not naive about humanity: neither was He totally pessimistic. The word He used most frequently was "lost". People lose their way, get on the wrong road, stumble around without direction and then in that frantic, vulnerable state of lostness, make frantic, hurtful decisions. Things go wrong in the human situation, according to Jesus, sometimes for the best of motives, not because everyone is rotten to the core.

I think we know what that means. The Jonesville tragedy taught us a lesson about the potential for evil when people act out their lostness. I think we know what it means, personally, to be lost. We may have a distant memory from childhood. But more to the point we may have strayed from a road we thought twenty years ago was clear and straight. More to the point, we may feel lost morally: we may in fact be in an ethical wilderness, having made a compromise or two on the basis of peer pressure or pragmatism and discovered that we've lost our way now entirely. We may be lost relationally having strayed from our dearest love, and now - in moments of terrible honesty we know we can't find the way back alone.

And each of us knows, I think, that dark night of the soul, when all the certainties are gone; when the only thing real seems to be the terrible inevitability

of our eventual death; when we look into the void and see nothing but emptiness. That's the kind of lostness the poets and philosophers and artists describe but each of us understands.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is precisely the Good News that God is not lost, even though we may be. That it is His nature not to wait for us to stumble our own way out of the wilderness, but to come on in after us.

It is the biggest and dearest and best thought in our faith. In fact there are no words quite adequate to define it. Francis Thompson, the poet, made the best effort I know of in The Hound of Heaven.

"I fled Him, down the nights
and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the midst of tears
I hid from Him, and under running laughter...
From those strong Feet that
followed,
Followed after,
But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbed pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,
They beat - and a Voice beat
More instant than the feet.
All things betray thee
Who betrayest Me."

On and on that chase goes in that mysterious, troubled poem which speaks so deeply to many of us. Until, at the end, the chase is over and the voice says:

"Rise, clasp My hand,
and come!...
Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,
I am He Whom thou seekest."

How does God come? What form does the search take? I think that depends on where you are lost. I believe God finds us sometimes in the experience of a troubled conscience: in anger over injustice, in impatience with ourselves. I think He finds us in the experience of intense, passionate love: in joy, compassion, affection. I believe God finds us when we experience spiritual restlessness, when for no reason at all we feel the need to search for Him. I believe God finds us in the valley of the shadow of death: when a trip to the hospital - or a book - or a dream - or a sudden memory reminds us of our own mortality: and we know, suddenly, our smallness, and helplessness and lostness. I believe that when we sense ourselves most lost, we will be found. I believe God, the Good Shepherd, pursues us across the labyrinth of years we are given. My deepest faith is that the matter is in His hands: that we do live by His grace: that He will find us: that we are safe. That - as the old hymn puts it - "The King of Love my shepherd is
Whose goodness faileth never
I nothing lack if I am His
And He is mine forever." Amen.

Almighty God, our Father, as we search find us. When we are lost, help us to know that we are not alone. Grant us, O God, in these days of Lent, to experience anew Your love for us and all Your children. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.